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EXCEPTIONALLY EXCEPTIONAL EXPRESSIONS IN JAPANESE: JAPANESE LINGUISTICS

1. INTRODUCTION

What is your image of Japan or Japanese? – Ninja, Sushi, Nintendo, or Mazda? Many things to share with the world. – But the nation might appear to be exotic or mysterious, especially, to the westerners (Rubin 1992). You may think the people are always bowing to each other whenever they meet. When they bow, no lax friendly expression is on their faces but a serious tensed mood is. That is correct to some extent. Mandatory for the members of the Japanese society is a type of politeness that is peculiar to Japanese. It is one of the most intriguing features that make Japan discrete from the western nations.

Politeness is, of course, a universal notion. Anywhere in this world, people have this notion of their own within their local societies (Leech 1983). But, that of Japanese society is quite unique to its members (Azuma 1994). That is why people outside Japanese often make jokes about it to laugh at the novelty.

However, if the truth should be told, Japanese people are not as polite as you think. See how they make a request form, for example, as in below:

(1) [At the sushi bar, speaking to someone sitting next to you]

Sumimasen. Shoyu o totte kure masen ka?

'Excuse me. Can't you pass me the soy sauce, please?'

This is a natural utterance you may here at any sushi restaurants in Japan. As you can see from English translation, a Japanese way of making a request does not sound much polite. Rather, it communicates an arrogant attitude of the speaker. But this is the form Japanese very often use to ask favors. However, if you were to ask the favor of passing something to you, you would prefer a request form in (2).

(2) *Excuse me. Can you pass me the soy sauce, please?*

Naturally, you would avoid making a request in a negative interrogative. Why? It is because you want to behave properly as a matured member of the society you belong to. No one wants to cause troubles using a rude-sounding utterance for a request, unless intended to do so. Next, let's see why negative interrogative forms are undesired for requests.

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2. NEGATIVE INTERROGATIVES

Brown and Levinson (1987) comment that negative interrogatives normally impede a hearer's face. This effect is due to the nature of the structure of negative interrogatives. Consider some of those features below:

(2') [A teacher talks to her students who got upset when she started distributing the tests.]
(a) **Did* / (b) *Didn't* *I say that I would give you tests today?*

If her utterance is made with an affirmative form as in (2'a), it will be an unnatural sentence in this context where she is confirming what she said earlier during the course of the class. It implies that the speaker has some problems with her memory function, while the negative counterpart (2'b) does not show such an ego-split of the speaker. It successfully communicates confirmation of the information announced earlier by the same speaker.

This is because a negative interrogative always presupposes the propositional content described by the form to be true. An affirmative interrogative, on the contrary, does not have such a property. The propositional content of the sentence is not necessarily true.

Consider the following examples:

(3) [Teacher talking to her students]
Did I say I would cancel the next test? … a) *Oh yeah, I did.*
b) *Mmm, I doubt it.*

The teacher can either admit or reject what she would have said to the class, as in (3.a) and (3.b), respectively. There is, unlike its negative counterpart, no obligatory truth-or-false definiteness of the propositional content with an affirmative interrogative. It can be either value with this interrogative form.

Another set of examples is invitations. Since affirmative forms do not definitely presuppose the propositional content be true, they are not suited for an invitation like negative counterparts are, as in (4).

(4) [A person inviting a friend to the party]
(a) ?? *Do* / (b) *Don't* *you want to come with us?*

A negative interrogative (4.b) indicates the propositional content is true. That is, *you want to come with us*. So, the speaker produces an invitation as if making a confirmation question that the addressee wants to come with the speaker. On the other hand, an affirmative interrogative (4.a) sounds more like a yes-no question than an invitation because of its neutral stance on true or false of the propositional content described.

These points will be clearer when these questions are preceded by *wh*-word of *why*, as in (5). It intensifies the functions of the clauses that follow. An invitation gets stronger and turns almost an encouragement with a negative clause, and a yes-no question-like becomes a discouragement, on the contrary, with an affirmative clause.

(5) [A person is asking his friend to take a course together.]

Why a) **do* / b) *don't* *you want to come with us?*

As we have seen, a negative interrogative form has the true value of propositional content it carries. Because of that, it can, also, be used as an invitation, and it could become even an encouragement with help of the special word. Therefore, a negative interrogative form communicates in a stronger way than its affirmative counterpart does if used as a request.

But how come the Japanese are so inconsistent within themselves? They are being notoriously polite on one hand; they produce non-polite request forms, on a daily basis, on the other. T. Adachi (1999) and S. Fukushima (2003), also, point to this. What you will find is an amazing linguistic device, which Japanese people have invented long before, to become pushy but polite simultaneously. Next, let's take a look at a set of magic words that help Japanese act that way.

3. FUNCTIONS OF DONATORY VERBS

We have seen apparent rudeness of the Japanese in the previous sections. However, Japanese do behave like the rest of the world in some cases, since they are, also, the same mankind as you are. See another set of examples of a request for making the document:

(6) [At the office, asking your sub- or co-ordinate to submit a document]

Sumimasen. Asu made ni kono syorui deki- (a) *masu /* (b) ??*masen ka?*

'Excuse me. (a) Can / (b) ??Can't you finish making the document by tomorrow?'

Now, what you see is Japanese behaving as a normal polite speaker like you. An affirmative interrogative (6.a) is preferred to its negative form (6.b) for a request. This is because, as exemplified above, the speaker 's expectation – you finish it by tomorrow – does not impede the addressee's right of freedom with an affirmative interrogative.

But why did Japanese appreciate using the rude type of a request form as in (1) earlier? Now, see a mini-discourse presented by a Japanese immigrant to Hawaii. He talks about one episode on his childhood.

(7) Pineapple train

When I was small, trains were running from the pineapple fields to the port. So, I threw (nage-ta) several mangos to a worker on the train. He, then, kicked (ke-tta) me back a box of pineapples from the train.

This story appears to be presenting a fight between the boy and the train worker. They threw fruits to each other. But what the speaker meant to be is a more heart-warming friendly story.

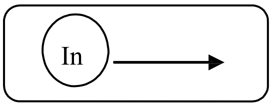
The intended version of the story is as in (8):

(8) *When I was small, trains were running from the pineapple fields to the port. So, I*

> ***gave*** *throwing (nagete-**age-ta**) several mangos to a worker on the train **(for him to eat)**. He, then, **gave** kicking (kette-**kure-ta**) me back a box of pineapples from the train **(in return)**.*

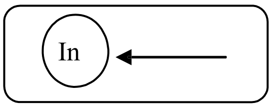
Here, they are exchanging tropical produce to each other, mangos to pineapples and vice versa. The transference of the fruits is not to damage but benefit the opponents. What was missing from the original story is a special type of auxiliary verbs that help to indicate the benefactive condition from the giver to the receiver (Hashimoto 2001, Masuoka 2001, and many others). Those verbs are donatory verbs of giving and receiving. They are social dexis and their use is socially determined on the basis of in/out-group memberships of the speaker in a particular context upon the utterance. There are two *give*'s and one *receive* basic forms, as schematized in (9).

(9) Give 1 *Ageru*



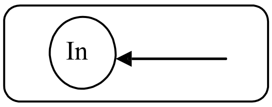
I gave 1 it to you.
**You gave 1 it to me.*

Give 2 *Kureru*



**I gave 2 it to you.*
You gave 2 it to me.

Receive *Morau*



I received it from you.
?You received it from me.

As schematized with an arrow (a direction of movement) and a circle (in-group members including the speaker), and exemplified with sentences next to them, things can be moved only from the in-group member to others with give1 and receive, but it is the other way around with give2. These verbs are, thus, social deixis for their use determined by group-memberships of the speaker.

Now, let's get back to the benefactive condition, special features of these verbs. Examine the following sentences, all with the give2 verb:

(10) a. *Sauna ga watasi no karada o iyasite-**kureta*** (gave 2).
The sauna healed (gave healing) my body.

b. *ABBA ga ongaku no tanosisa o watasi ni osiete-**kureta*** (gave 2).
ABBA taught (gave teaching) me a delight of music.

Sentences above in (10) describe something we enjoy or appreciate. Definitely, benefactive condition is involved in those cases – relaxation at a sauna and time for nice music. If we got rid of the give2 verb from these sentences, acceptability of the sentences might change. See those in (11):

(11) a. *Sauna ga watasi no karada o iyasita.*
The sauna healed my body.
b. ?*ABBA ga ongaku no tanosisa o watasi ni osieta.*
ABBA taught me a delight of music.

It still sounds fine without the give2 verb with the sauna sentence, but it raises an impression that the current discourse is somewhat incomplete with ABBA sentence, as in (11.a) and (11.b), respectively.

This point will be very clear when we switch the subject with a more individuated animate entity.

(12) ?? *Anata ga watasi no karada o iyasita (by massage).*
You healed my body (by massage).

This is syntactically correct but practically marginally correct because the speaker's talk most likely goes on to make some kind of concluding remarks following this sentence in a natural setting. Otherwise, the speaker sounds so impersonal. A particular benefactive condition is involved in this context where the speaker got healed by massage by the addressee. So, indication of the benefactive condition is pragmatically mandatory as a matured member of the society. Therefore, as transitivity becomes stronger in terms of the animacy and individuation, nature of the benefactive construction counts.

Now, look at examples of the other context where benefactive condition is not involved.

(13) a. **Zisin ga okotte-**kureta*** (gave2).
The quake has occurred (gave occurring) to us.
b. **Tuma ga okotte watasi no kao o tataite-**kureta*** (gave2).
My wife, getting mad, hit (gave hitting) me in my face.

It is only a disaster but nothing else to have an earthquake or a problem with your spouse. The use of a donator verb presents a contradiction in the contexts described by the sentence and pointed out by the special verb. One signals it is misfortune but the other fortune. Therefore, the use of donator verbs in the above contexts is inappropriate and results in unacceptable sentences.

To clarify this point, see examples without the donator verbs.

(14) a. *Zisin ga okotta.*
The quake has occurred to us.

b. *Tuma ga okotte watasi no kao o tataita.*
My wife, getting mad, hit me in my face.

Those sentences are just naturally acceptable without the incoherency emerged in their original counterparts in (13). Natural disasters or accidents are

unwelcome events, so they should be described with no benefactive markers.

When we need bitter medicine to treat illness, we do not regard the awful taste of medicine as something unwanted but do so as welcomed. So, it is feasible to mention strictness of love, for example, with a benefactive marker of the donator verb. Recall when you were young, you must have been loved by your parents. And if you grew up in a very strict family, you would have experienced the following type of extreme output of the love.

(15) *Titi ga watasi no kao o tataite-**kureta*** (gave2) [*when I did something wrong*].
My father hit (**gave** hitting) me in my face (for me to correct the bad behavior).

Being hit in a face is, of course, an unpleasant incident to all of us. But if it is triggered by love to you, a story is different. The hitter only wishes you to become a better person and it has caused some pain in your face. You know such an intention of the hitter very well. So, although you get embarrassed being hit, this incident turns out beneficial to you. Hence, the use of a donatory verb is designated.

4. AGENT ROLE AND BENEFACTIVE CONDITION

So far, all the examples above have spontaneous agents, both animate and non-animate. It includes even the sauna because it will make you relaxed, even if you do not ask, when you take it. All of these agents give you something that is beneficial to you.

This is, also, true for a *causee* agent who originally does not have any intention of doing a favor for you but who was, then, asked and made to do something beneficial for you. Regarding this caused benefactive action, native Japanese speakers of English learners tend to make a certain type of English request forms mistakenly due to influence of the first language (Kitano 1990). See an example of this below:

(16) [Talking your teacher]
**Professor, I want you to read and comment on my paper*.

It is easy to imagine that this will lead you to a horrifying result on your grades of the subject. English speakers (probably, most of non-Japanese speakers) do not prefer to be a *causee* agent without being asked explicitly.

More commonly used preferable request forms are positive interrogatives, like the one presented earlier in (2) – *Can you pass me the soy sauce, please?* The addressee is inquired whether s/he can implement the requested action. Thereby, a speaker's politeness is laced in this speech act of request. But, in Japanese, request forms like the above are so frequently used that Japanese English speakers easily get trapped by simply translating Japanese into English. The original Japanese counterpart of (16) and its more literal English translation are as follows:

(17) *Sensei, paper o mite-**morai**-tai no desu ga.*
Professor, I want to **receive** your reading my paper (to make some comments on it).

Here, an implied agent for reviewing the paper is a professor who is made to take the agent role by the speaker. The professor is never asked if s/he has time for reading through the paper, but only the speaker's desire for a request is expressed. It appears to be as an impolite request as the one in (16). Nevertheless, it is not so. What we need to note is that one of the donatory verbs is used – *morau* 'to receive'. Overtly marked is the benefactive condition where the speaker receives the professor's reviewing the paper whereby s/he can improve it.

Here, the speaker is very clearly pointing out that s/he receives the benefit from the professor. The speaker is announcing loudly, *you are the benefactor and I am the beneficiary* to acknowledge owing one from the professor. However, Japanese English learners forget that English does not have any donatory verb like this to indicate benefactive condition.

Therefore, the key is the indication of benefactive condition, where it is applicable, that is signaled by donatory verbs. As far as benefactive condition is presented by the speaker, willingness of the agent who does a favor for the speaker is secondary. Hence, all kinds of agents, animate or non-animate and spontaneous or even *causee*, are possible to be used for requests as well as simple descriptions of the benefactive condition.

5. NEGATIVE INTERROGATIVES AND POLITENESS

Let's wrap up the research question of this study. Japanese are notoriously polite, while one of the most preferred request forms of their language appears quite rude despite the fact. We have seen that negative interrogatives are more appreciated over positive counterparts for requests in Japanese. (The example request forms (1) and (2) are repeated as (18a) and (18b), respectively.)

(18) *Sumimasen.* *Shoyu o totte kure* a) *masen* > b) *masu ka?*
'Excuse me. a) Can't > b) Can you pass me the soy sauce, please?'

This seemingly bad linguistic behavior of Japanese, however, turns to be a magical request form that can be both pushy and polite simultaneously.

As exemplified in the previous sections, propositional contents carried in only negative interrogatives are presupposed to be true. A speaker is, inevitably, claiming what is said in the proposition by making a request form or pretending to ask a question. This is the reason why you hesitate to use the form to request someone something. It is almost like an assertion rather than a request. However, to put it the other way around, negative interrogatives are the more effective tool to execute your request. But, again, the problem of being impolite remains.

What we saw, then, is a set of special verbs of giving and receiving. Those donatory verbs are to use if and only if benefactive condition is involved in a

described context. They cannot be used when nothing beneficial occurs. It will sound impersonal if they are not used when something beneficial occurs. This benefactive marking, also, works with a causee agent regardless of the person's intention of granting the request. So, the donatory verbs are indispensable words when making requests in Japanese.

The most commonly used donatory verb form for requests is *kudasai*, an honorific imperative form of give1 *kureru*. Its equivalent word of English would be *please* of another magic word. Consider three types of requests, all with give1 verb.

(19) a. *Sensei, paper o mite kudasai (give1/Imp).*
Professor, please read and comment on my paper.

b. *Sensei, paper o mite kudasai-masu ka?*
Professor, will you please read and comment on my paper?

c. *Sensei, paper o mite kudasai-masen ka?*
Professor, won't you please read and comment on my paper?

All of them are beautiful request forms in Japanese. The first type of an imperative is, of course, strong but not so humble. The second type of a positive interrogative, on the other hand, presents a soft touch with humility. However, the third type of a negative interrogative has the best performance as a request form by being both strong and humble.

All the three forms have the benefactive marking donatory verb that overtly indicates the relationships that the addressee is the benefactor and the speaker is the beneficiary. This message is most strongly communicated by a negative interrogative because of its presupposition of the described propositional content.

6. CONCLUSION

We have seen how Japanese speakers can be apparently rude while sustaining politeness. These contradicted features can be held by a special social deixis of the donatory verbs along with negative interrogatives. These two linguistic tools present like a symbiotic relationship – one directly announcing that *you* are the person *I* owe, and the other forwarding this message as further as possible. Consequently, the magical result can be reached.

Finally, a free translation of the problem request form in this study is provided as in (20):

(20) Shoyu o totte kure masen ka?

I know you are such a nice person, the beneficiary who is going to give me something I need, that you will do me a favor of passing the soy sauce to me.

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Abstract

This study presents functions of donatory verbs in the elaborated politeness systems in Japanese. The author helps you to solve a mysterious problem encounter above in the text.

Keywords: *politeness, donatory verbs, interrogative questions*.

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